



# SAND STORM

(An off-the-trail story)

by RAYMOND S. SPEARS

**P**ACKY BUNT was a great thief, a mongrel, his citizenship long since lost and forgotten. He led other renegades of lesser degree, who shared his inordinate pride in the thought that none ever excelled or even equaled him. Nevertheless, ambition stirred him to attempt a feat beside which even his own scoundrelisms would seem trivial.

He longed to steal, not a little band of sheep, but a major flock, one of those great divisions of twenty thousand head or so which traveled in regimental sections and spread over a whole county or two in ceaseless forage marches. If he could capture and escape with such a mass of woolies he should be forever famous among The Borderers, and even

the least of his outlaw band, a lackwit, would have a fortune to spend and a name.

His desperadoes were called The Stealers, *Los Ladinos*. Of horses they had captured many, and to cattle ranches they had been a scourge. They had caused dismay to prospectors, miners, stage drivers and express messengers. The thunder of their horses' hoofs shook communities with dread; their patronage brought ruin to the merchants whose shelves they denuded. The rendezvous of Packy Bunt was Sinsink. There, while his scoundrels shouted and cheered, Packy boasted that he would perform a feat so great that the Ten Commandments would be unseated.



The band set its courses for the tallest mountains and traveled by the light of the stars. Because they were choosers and pickers, they rode the best of mounts and drove for pack man-mules of many brands.

Despite long experience they had never stolen sheep. A flock of sheep would be different from other loot. Assuredly, they had often killed sheep to eat, while the sheep herder raged inwardly but smiled outwardly, his feelings enraged at feeding these white-teethed, red-brown cheeked and black hearted villains. They picked their mutton with care, choosing wethers of the best condition. They would shoot a priceless dog that did not veil his resentment or contempt.

Packy Bunt always added a disk of silver or gold to the red snake skin around his hat, serving as a ribbon, when he had led his followers into a successful new crime, or killed some one with his own hand—that hat-band was a tinkling, glistening reminder of his prowess, each medal kept bright by sweethearts on his range.

He was careful of but one feature of his dress—the hat. He wore blue overalls, or discarded trousers found at some raided ranch; a shirt stripped from some victim, regardless of the slight perforation where a bullet had passed through; and lacking a fifty-cent pair of suspenders, he would take a piece of lariat or a strip of rawhide cut from beef to hold up trousers of too great girth. The belt or two of cartridges without and the money belt within troubled the small of his back when these shirts were too tight for comfort.

The outlaw always carried a watch, which he as regularly forgot to wind, since he knew the hours by the sun, moon and stars. At the same time it was a fine looking jewel, having been presented to a mine manager on account of excellent up-building work in the interests of owners, and so Packy Bunt car-

ried it and polished it as he sat moodily by a fire at night, letting the flames reflect their brightness in the color of gold, and pass through the diamonds and rubies with which the case had been studded. Sometimes he would scrape the metal with his meat knife to admire the brightness.

Packy thought of a thousand great flocks of sheep that were undisturbed. He saw in his mind's eye the dust a flock carries with it, grazing through young white sage, through scattering corn, over harvested cabbage field or along the edge of timberline. His chuckle greeted the thought of a forest ranger grimly patrolling the forest edge while a sheep herder haunts the "limit," grinning and patiently waiting the chance to go inside to violate by grazing the forbidden terrain.

Going up and down in the camp and town stages, he studied the sheep along the roads, up the adjacent hills and their watering places. He could read a sheep flock by the dust it raised, whether it was a migrating band, a feeding flock, or wethers, ewes or mixed. He judged the shepherds according to their close-herding or scattering rangers. He became acquainted with hundreds of sheep tenders. When on occasion he met one, far from his trusty band of sheep, not one would betray him through fear of his revenge. Of all people exposed to vengeance by nature and occupation, none is quite so easily attacked as a sheep herder.

The time ripe, he took thirty of his best men and segregated them in the County of Carsicce, where he sat them around fires that burned in the red canyon brightly, illuminating the high walls.



**EVEN BUNT** was astonished at the excellence of his followers. Not one but had committed many murders; not one but was scarred by bullets, knives, rope or mishandling of horses. Some were



young and forward; others humped up over the flames in the morose silence of maturity. Half-breeds, far wanderers, they spoke many tongues. Two or three were fat and lazy in appearance, but they had particular values—often enormous strength; others were lean and frail looking, but had astonishing endurance or spirit or other distinctions. A boy among them had stabbed a woman in the back.

"We'll get the flock of Pasque Carbone, the Basque!" Packy ended his harangue to the picked band. "You, Miguel, go with me, while Inagua the Jack takes—" Accordingly, he assigned each of his chosen men. When they were through, the Carbone flock was wholly encompassed, from the band of ewes attended by Pedro the Innocent to the twelve thousand wethers attended by Judd the Yank. Fourteen bands in all comprised a master flock of twenty thousand sheep and thousands of lambs. All were in the Hawkane Basin, grazing at the moment toward the low winter pastures of the Fond Devils Tuilles, a great marsh, five months distant.

The Hawkane Basin was just over the mountains from the canyon where The Stealers received their last instructions. They rode up over The Pass and spread through the basin, each with his own job to do.

Inagua and his sole companion approached Pedro the Innocent and deftly cut his throat; Judd the Yank was less easily disposed of, resisting several bullets and succeeded in killing Miguel. The other shepherds were disposed of with varying difficulty, and all were nicely sunk in the ground or in bottomless pits or heaped over with rocks. Only two dogs were killed, and as the dogs remained with the flocks, the renegade shepherds easily persuaded them to continue their duties.

As for Pasque Carbone, the owner, he was the most easily overcome of all. Having gone to town for supplies, he

returned with a wagon load of simple needs, such as beans, bacon, onions, lentils, and garlic, with ample peppers. Unhappily for himself, he had drunk corn liquor and cactus sap. Packy Bunt had merely to drop a lariat noose around his neck and drag him to a convenient place for hiding in the arid land, thus doing two things at once—killing and removing. The wagon driver, not so drunk, caused excitement before he fell struggling in death.

On the next day but one, Packy rode to an isolated mountain top in the great Hawkane Basin and looked in the early dawn over that vast domain. A grand scene, a valley spotted by chaparral, by bare areas of lifeless alkali, by rolling crinkles of earth and fallen, crumbling slips of talus along mountain foot and wastes of desiccating stone.

In the distance, by the Mountain of Lost Jaguars, Packy saw dust ascending against the face of the sunrise. At the ends of this faint cloud he saw puffs of dust—the dashing of drivers and dogs. Other rising clouds of floury alkali disclosed the exact location of all the captured bands. Packy Bunt smiled to himself, a grin that contorted his face into a mask of unloveliness under that beautiful hat with its weight of metal insignia of triumphs. The new disk should be of bright, new gold—a double eagle; a silver dollar was not precious enough.

Silhouetted against the sky line, he drank to his own health and prosperity.

When he turned down the mountain, assured that all was well, he rejoined the captured wagon, which was pounding along a trail hundreds of years old. From all directions he watched the dust clouds marking the progress of the sheep bands, all heading in the same direction as before, only faster. Only the shepherds had changed. One does not much hurry woolly heads, a fact making the theft of twenty thousand with lambs a great venture, requiring not only good luck but



extermination of owner, foreman, herders and witnesses.

"Hi-i!" breathed Bunt, riding his horse near the wagon, like an owner in good standing.

He was manager and proprietor now. He needed time to make his getaway, but he had it. Carbone had been notoriously wrapped up in his sheep, staying with them, with no one to keep track of them but himself and no one to inquire into his own coming, going or failure to appear. Perhaps another sheep man might notice his mark and the strangers attending the flocks, but pasture enemies would mind their own business, not his.



SO THE SHEEP moved in Hawkan Basin. From spring to spring, from pasture to pasture, from end to end, weaving through three different passes into the next basin, where the Basque, Carbone, had won the grazing privilege against cattle and horses and held it against his kind, a vast forage valley. Past there, they hit the desert.

One day was like another. The tawny land was trod by all the hoofs, each hoof tossing a bit of dust into the air at every step. The master thief rode at large, leaving the wagon to visit the minor flocks and exult with the rascal herders over their great feat. They desecrated their fellows by the color of the dusts; Bunt knew by the clouds what each band was doing. On the wind was white dust.

Day by day the sheep measured the land with their million steps, little heads pecking at the ground, like agitated hens, the fuzz behind the ears where there was too much skin stretching in and out like unsymmetrical springs.

Beyond the El Segundo Basin the trail of the great flock was not the trail of usage. It could not be. The market did not lie in that normal Sierra feed-land of winter. From here, onward, Bunt must go where other flocks did not, find-

ing new country where neither he nor the sheep brand were known. To sell his twenty thousand sheep with big lambs, he must find an unsuspecting fence who would ship according to his need.

Where a band came to water at a spring, he shot the homesteader, who had tried to collect two cents each for permitting the eager sheep to drink. He shot the man's wife for good measure and left the baby in the cabin.

He was constrained to bring all the bands together to cross the Valley of Skeletons, a desolation beyond which was a land of increasing feed and—his chief consideration—a market. The scattered bands, floating together across the shadeless desert, made indeed a pretty picture. They were like dull clouds casting shadows upon the land, and the noise they made was oddly tender and gentle in the waste of thirst and heat.

Bunt looked with feelings akin to supreme self-dependence. Was it not proved by this time that it was even possible to steal sheep, if one but fooled the sheep herders, if one waited the occasion expertly to use a knife or gun to slit a throat or break a heart? It needed but the covering of a grave.

And so they came to Skeleton Valley, a month too soon.



A DRY stream bed meanders from end to end of Skeleton Valley. A most unpromising simplicity of detail prevailed—scattering sage brush, unusually withered even for sage; alkali, pale cream in color, reflecting the sun with relentless glare and boiling head of false mirage. Over low ranges and knolls, running waves of sand lay down the center of the wide, level bottoms. A once living forest there had been turned by Time's magic to stone.

No tradition tells by whom the valley was named after its skeletons, though innumerable bones indicated the ap-



propriateness of the nomenclature. Skeletons of historic and prehistoric origin both gave testimony.

When Packy Bunt came over the divide with his outlaws, goats, dogs, sheep and mules, the mountains across that way loomed clear and stern, the crest cool with snow, the flank dark with evergreen shade. The long range seemed but a short distance away. Across the bottom waves seemed to be washing through the troughs of the sand dunes and these broke around and through the fossil trunks and up-swung ribs and limbs of the monsters of old.

The great master flock ate the forage quickly. The sheep surged through the waterhole and trampled the outlet, leaving turgid muck. The sheep stealers looked to their leader, askance. Behind them was the waste of their trail; ahead of them, down the valley, was that lurking spread of thorns and dust, of bones and fossils and mirage. They could not now turn back, since on the other side was new country, fresh pastures, and the run-off of early snows and timberbelt reservoirs.

Nevertheless, they hesitated, looking back at pastures too quickly crossed by sheep driven close-herded. Not fear nor lack of confidence checked them. They saw coming down the basin a figure whirling in buoyant dance, a Sand Maiden; they knew and did not love her. The goats started on; the sheep followed; the dogs yelped, and the mules strained ahead. The men had no choice. They swung reluctantly to their places. Those behind saw those in the lead plunge into a sea that did not exist.

They poured into the damp runoff from the mucky waterhole. The mud stank. Men, goats, mules, horses and dogs found a last feeling of moisture. The sheep flowed like a gray blanket, bleating and baa-ing, unterrified, unconquered, each jealous of his own place in the great, smoky cloud spreading out

over the undulations of that weird, withered land.

Living upon a past as successful as his, Packy Bunt saw nothing to dread. He plunged ahead, dumpy in pride and grinning satisfaction, sipping at his own waterbag and chewing a pebble. Out of the corners of his eyes he noticed an occasional sheep or lamb dragging behind. At first he barked to have these hustled ahead into the flock—to save three dollars or six dollars—but presently the same weaklings would fall forward and lie squirming, as if mortally wounded, gasping. Such were now left for vulture, raven and coyote. These birds were now flocking above the dust of the herd, they that must have awakened concern in less perfectly self-satisfied, confident men. It would be hell to cross—but sure, they'd make it.

For hours they kept going, unresting, squinting, shrinking and bending in the glare. They came to the sand and found lanes through it, where the wind had swept the gravel and clay bare. On either side golden waves rose in billows and surges, rollers and swells—and there were glaring white waves of sand, too, white crystals among the yellow dunes, sorted out, like with like.

The driven sheep fell into a panic of urgency. Behind them stretched the fallen tufts of gray, with solemn sentinels around them, and less patient black scoundrels perched upon them, ravens flapping bold wings at the feeble struggles—vultures waiting. What was a sheep or two in a flock of thousands?



SOMETHING began to happen. Gusts of zephyr, blasts of heat, lifts of sand, came smoking from the crests of dunes. Eyes that were bloodshot looked toward the north and saw the head of the valley veiled by an uplifted host of figures.

"The Sand Maidens are beginning to



step!" some one cried from parched throat.

The wind freshened into a gale. The hot earth that had been at rest in the valley lifted suddenly in a tawny burst of swirling harpies, spinning Sand Maids, leaping and bounding skyward, but kicking the earth with toe-tips. High in the blue, unsuspected moisture suddenly became white cumuli of clouds—peaks, valleys and crystalline shadows, spreading with rose blushes, cool to suggestion as seen by the tormented travelers in that depth of stinging heat. All around the horizon were green and golden skies, the sun vanishing amid great rings of purple, in raw colors and flaming halos that licked the eyes with searing tongues and the imagination with lurid threat. The sheep stealers looking about, caught glimpses of one another, some in halos of red and some romping in black flames, while the sheep were pink and sparkling. They laughed and still were not afraid, only suffering and cursing.

The wind in the hour of terrific color appeared to be coming from the northward, beating against a tall, blank wall of yellows in streaks and heaps, flying over an army of racing Sand Maidens who wore flapping yellow and greenish raiment—but some were dark and deathly orange.

At one moment all saw the vast approach of a wonderful mansion, or castle, or devil's cathedral of imaginable front, flaring windows and towering spires. Their mad laughter ceased as they tried with gutturals and yelps to indicate what they noticed to the dimly veiled figures of men nearest them.

They saw blue and red, columns and balconies, hallways and enormous ballrooms; they felt the blasts from eternal fires that heated the sand about them in the flying skirts of the merciless Desert Sisters, whose singing rang in their ears and added to the uproar of twenty

thousand sheep, yelping dogs and shouting men.

Through the vast mirage glowed lurid flames. It was as though it were a house afire, but with imperishable, eternal heat, flashing through the fantastic structure that staggered in its own blasts. High overhead, where the sunset was glowing, the sky seethed and boiled, still continuing the illusion of vast portals and terrible conflagration, all in a land where it seemed as though nothing could possibly have remained unburned to feed a fire. The fossils of trees turned to torches, mockeries.

The incredible, fiery storm swept down upon the sheep, the goats, the dogs and the mounted sheep stealers, who regarded it with the buoyant defiance bred of long experience in escaping written codes, humans and natural phenomena.

The shadows brought a kind of coolness; high clouds poured down ragged shreds of black rain, which the dry air of the sandy billows sucked dry a mile above the parched earth, each drop turned hot and evaporated on flying tiny stones. Rattling, clicking and fretting became the roar of a multitude of dry, crisp sounds; the promise of rain and moisture turned to stinging crystals of sand, from which even the weathered and toughened bandits turned. The sheep, white, grayish or green with settled dust, began to smoke and turn yellow and ghastly in the hot, dry blizzard, their bleating protests dying away into the terrified gasping silences of a panic-struck, breathless flock. They suddenly began to race, to break, to bob and bump along, scattering through men and dogs. Packy had a sudden realization of the necessity of holding them in a compact mass to take what was coming. Who could quiet a sheep stampede?

The sheep, futile in silent terror, fled. Men, circling about, ran them down with blood-stained clubs and lariat hondas; the dogs galloped low, faithful



to the flock, snapping at the heels, shouldering into the throats of bell-wethers, and herding the goats. The tinkling of flight spread out into the thickening sand cloud, mocking the shrieks of the thief-herders, who no longer spat mud but blew dust from mouth and nostrils.

They lost sense of direction as the wind swirled in ten thousand columns of mingled sand and alkali, the Dancing Maids of the Desert, lifting and tumbling victims about with their heels. Some men abandoned their efforts, the herders afoot searching for their horses at the supply wagon, where they crept into the shelter of canvas stretched over the hoops and on the earth. Some never found the wagon. The sheep vanished in the fog without moisture, whose drops were hurtling pebbles like buck-shot, drops without water.

Instead of dying in the dusk, the storm blew all night, all the next lurid, unbreathable, tawny day; through another night and another day. It swept and rushed dry cyclone, made up of tornadoes and whirlwinds, in a host of uncountable, swirling figures dancing down Skeleton Valley to the singing music of wind upon singing sand amarch. The vast dwelling of devils flew by at last. Suddenly the gale blew out in gusts; the mile-high tornadoes puffed up; the host of the Dancing Maids twitched their flying robes and became scatter witches, whose skirts, flung high, spread wide and vanished. A soft, tender breeze fell cool from the rimrock mountains upon the parched and quivering valley.

The sun shone through the hovering dust which rained quickly to the earth; the western sky was revealed in immeasurable calm and color. An evening star shone; constellations appeared and the sky became alight. The air cleared. Dust returned to dust.

The moon rose less than full. The last, lightest dust, upon the dry play

lake became as a sea. Beams shone upon the plain of long, stretched-out drifts of sand, wherein lifted dune crests cast shadows and fossil trees raised stony branches above the whitened bones that gave Skeleton Valley its name—relics of monsters upon whom the Sand Maidens had danced in myriads of assemblies down the deathful ages, hot-footed in wanton carelessness, merry and cruel.

Where had grown an ancient park the skeleton of a buffalo lay whole, with flapping shreds of dark skin hanging upon the ribs, uncovered by the running of the dry sand sea. Hunks of alkali, skulls of horses, deer and cattle, a dead man sitting huddled with his blanket blown from his withered mummy frame—there the harpy sprites had embraced him.



OUT in the midst of the valley a huge monument, a great swollen wave of gray sand, had come to rest in the lee of one of Bunt's wagons. Now, through cracks in the box, ran down the fine sand, hour-glass emptying of the dust the vanishing dancers had become, filling the interstices of the load.

Sharp, crystal quartz had cut the canvas, polished the planks, and even brightened the iron rims, axle nuts—all the metal of the wagon tongue and chains. Humans, horses, dogs and goats lay prostrate, but mules were shaking the dust out of their coats and digging sand out of their ears with hoofs, sticking out their tongues to prodigious lengths, shaking the sand off of them, scraping them with their teeth, patient and disgusted.

Men crawled out of their tarp rolls, the sand running down their greasy shirts in dry rivulets and little avalanches. From their lips issued a waning torrent of groaning profanity, whispering, husky and futile, rasping the silence.

Packy Bunt crawled up into the des-



olation, stroking his felted black hat with trembling fingers worn in the stress of that tense agony. His green eyes flickered redly as the dust hung upon his twisted lashes. He shook and dry dust fell out of his ears and hair. He held his head to listen for a voice, for a bleat or cry of sheep. He heard only the faint whine of loose sand, settling in the troughs of the poised dunes.

Other men stumbled up with the mules, but Bunt looked around in the glaring moonlight and tried to find the twenty thousand sheep and uncounted lambs that he had stolen. As dawn broke he found drifts of sand with little wool tufts along the top, little spreads of curly woolen mats. Dragging at these, he found smothered ewes with lambs beneath, mouths fastened to mothers' teats. There about them, down the lee, he saw bits of mats, like bunch grass—sheep drowned in dust of stone. He cursed the stupidity of sheep.

He saw goats come up out of the beds of prickly pear. Snorting, they blew dust like smoke from their nostrils, as though they were possessed; plucking away the spines of barrel cactus, they gnawed into the sap within.

"This is Hell!" Bunt cursed, looked around and saw his gang, indifferent to what he said, unable to understand his words, but watching the contortions of his face, whose skin the crystals had cut through and streaked with dust and blood.

All were spitting dust; they pounced upon surprised goats, stabbed them and drank the blood to assuage their thirst. Yet as they saw the dust-smoking nostrils when the goats snorted, the bandits shrank and blinked in suspicion and even fear of creatures who breathed such fumes.

Packy Bunt surged to the largest and strongest mule, snarling at another man of similar choice and intention. He dragged a saddle from a heap, careless

of whose it was. Men came charging in upon the big pack beasts, whose endurance was best of all the things still living. Trembling with weakness, hatred and terror, seeing their leader, the most stalwart of all, now abandoning them, after leading them headlong into this unspeakable mess, hands reached for heavy holsters or for knife sheaths, tentatively, with lessening doubts and increasing anger and recklessness.

For minutes they mustered strength, circled for position, watched for openings, keeping clear of one another, yet making way—the strong against the weak, the quick against the strong,—all conscious of their unfitness, all hesitating to begin without the advantage, rising tide of panic and hatred becoming lust of vengeance as they saw Packy assuming to take the biggest, best mule. Against him they ranged; in watchful hesitation he tried to cinch the mount he had already bridled.

Suddenly, mustering all that he had, Packy Bunt snatched out his revolver. It jerked forth in a cloud of dust that had filled his holster. When he let go the barrel-full of alkali and sand jumped and burst. Others, who had held their guns till they were drained empty, let go. Bunt staggered back and stumbled, sagged and went down, snatching at his other gun in a gesture of hate.

The big mule kicked and squealed. Running mules marked the shooting and stabbing of the rascals among themselves, their bullets smoking into sand, ripping into men, whimpering through the air when they had scratched long gouges along surfaces—dogs, goats and masters engaged in mutual extermination.

The shooting and the dry-throat howls and chokings died away as the men died. Overhead came circling vultures; ravens planed down on spreading wings from the mountain junipers and higher pines, squawking and anxious lest they be cheated. They saw the



mules stretching out in a long line, ears laid back, eyes upon the mountains ahead, nostrils sniffing for water, and around them dogs and goats; stumbling and reeling after them, some creeping, were men who presently lost the trails and crawled around in circles.



**VULTURES** chose their own dead. Pitching down out of the sky, having come far and arrived late, the birds were still coming when others were sailing up, surfeited. And the flying host made unmistakable landmark in that enormous basin—a sign that a man saw, a desert rummy known as the Texas Hatter, so-called because he was always mad about something or other.

Coming to satiate his curiosity, he found the birds perched around. There was the wagon. He walked about, staring and swearing softly to himself. The heavy birds flapped away from dead things. Slinking coyotes retreated from the sheep they were unearthing. There were skeletons of buffalo and sabre-tooth tiger, claw-footed horses, mammoths, sheep and humans—accumulations of wild creatures of these thousand ages.

"Huh—Here's luck! First whack at this outfit!" Texas Hatter grinned, grumbling to himself, "A whole damned

herd of all the brutes and beasts that never was! Huh—Sheep! They started acrost the valley too early, looks like. Why, them's Ol' Carbone's sheep tags. Pasque neveh in God's world came this-away—Shu-u! Hyar's a dandy .30-30 carbine—"Taint rusty a bit—Dog-gone! Sheep stealers, I reckon. That's what—bandits!"

He stood gazing at two figures in twined embrace, skeletons and rags, big knife driven up, a big-six pointed to a hole in the top of a skull.

"Hell, that's funny!" Texas Hatter reflected, "Fightin' like cats and dogs. An' if that ain't Packy Bunt's big hat—the sun-of-a-gun! I'd know that anywhere's—spangles and all. He's picked clean as a trout—huh! They sure cut up his bones with lead slugs. Must-a be'n one hell of a battle! Um-m—They all got theirs—"

He stood turning the big, black hat around on his forefinger.

"Hi-i—That's tinklin' music!" he chuckled to himself, "Them spangles is money. Silver—Lawse! An' some is gold, yeller double-eagle gold! I c'n trade them in anywhere's, I bet. Yes, sir—I betcha—when I git to town, now, I c'n sure as God swap 'em for a drink!"

Only the vultures heard him.

PABST BLUE RIBBON

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